New York Theatre Critics' Reviews 1953

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1953 PRODUCTIONS
Premieres in Other Years

Original Reviews Appeared In These Volumes

1952 Vol.

Stage Play	*Page*
Bernardine	231
Children's Hour (The)	151
Deep Blue Sea (The)	207
*Dial M for Murder	215
Evening with Beatrice Lillie (An)	254
Male Animal (The)	297
Mrs. McThing	359
My Darlin' Aida	218
New Faces of 1952	278
Pal Joey	398
*Seven Year Itch (The)	186
Time of the Cuckoo (The)	235
Time Out for Ginger	177
Two's Company	157
Whistler's Grandmother	160
*Wish You Were Here	266

•

1951 Vol.

Fourposter (The)	190
*King and I (The)	304
Moon Is Blue (The)	322

•

1950 Vol.

*Guys and Dolls	185

•

1949 Vol.

*South Pacific	312

**Asterisks indicate shows scheduled to play week of October 5, 1953*

1953 PRODUCTIONS
Premieres During 1953

Reviews Appear in This Volume

Stage Play	*Page*
Anna Russell and Her Little Show	289
Bat (The)	390
Be Your Age	397
Bleak House	315
Camino Real	330
*Can-Can	304
Carnival in Flanders	286
Crucible (The)	383
Date With April (A)	318
Emperor's Clothes (The)	368
*Fifth Season (The)	380
Hazel Flagg	362
Horses in Midstream	325
John Brown's Body	358
Love of Four Colonels (The)	394
Love's Labour's Lost	372
Maggie	351
*Me and Juliet	298
Men of Distinction	307
Merchant of Venice (The)	340
Mid-Summer	386
Misalliance	354
*My 3 Angels	334
Oklahoma!	294
On Borrowed Time	365
*Picnic	348
Pin to See the Peepshow (A)	278
Pink Elephant (The)	312
*Porgy and Bess	337
Red Rainbow (A)	281
Room Service	322
Strong Are Lonely (The)	269
*Take a Giant Step	274
*Tea and Sympathy	266
Touchstone	375
*Wonderful Town	344
CRITICS' CIRCLE AWARD	320

Theatre Openings
"The Strong Are Lonely"
"Tea and Sympathy"

**Asterisks indicate shows scheduled to play week of October 5, 1953*

Theatre Critics' Reviews brings you each week the complete reviews as they originally appeared in these New York newspapers.

NEW YORK JOURNAL-AMERICAN
NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK POST
NEW YORK MIRROR
NEW YORK WORLD TELEGRAM & THE SUN
NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
NEW YORK TIMES

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"Tea and Sympathy"

New York Post

October 1, 1953

By Richard Watts Jr.

The Arrival of a New Playwright

It is being explanatory, rather than critical, to describe "Tea and Sympathy," the first work of a new playwright named Robert Anderson, as reminding one of a combination of John van Druten's "Young Woodley" and Lillian Hellman's "The Children's Hour." Attractively acted by Deborah Kerr and John Kerr—who, as everyone insists on pointing out, are not related—the play about a boy's school, which opened last night at the Ethel Barrymore Theater, is a sensitive and effective sentimental drama of unquestionable box-office magnetism.

If the hint of similarity with famous earlier dramas is inescapable to the playgoing veteran, it is because "Tea and Sympathy" deals, after the fashion of the first, with a wistful little romance between an innocent young student and the sympathetic wife of an unfeeling schoolmaster, and, in the manner of the second, with the evil done by the spreading of rumors about homosexuality. It must be hastily added, however, that Mr. Anderson has clearly a mind and an individual talent of his own. There is no doubt that he is a welcome addition to the theater.

Boy and Wife

To be more specific, "Tea and Sympathy" is the story of a lonely and misunderstood youth who, because he has artistic sensibilities and has played women's parts in amateur theatricals, is wrongly suspected of homosexual tendencies. Although the master in whose house he rooms is one of his chief persecutors, the wife of the teacher is kind and understanding, as well as beautiful. The play is pretty specific about the physical aspects of the resulting relationship, but it handles it with taste, delicacy and considerable emotional skill.

If, despite the emotional effectiveness and the compassion of Mr. Anderson's writing, I have some slight reservations concerning the evening, I suspect it is due more to quibbles about Elia Kazan's direction than to objections over the play. Mr. Kazan has staged it with his customary guile, but, in addition to making things very deliberate, he shows a tendency to go in for blacks and whites. The boy and the wife are just a little too gentle and noble, the teacher a trifle too studiously unpleasant, the boy's father a bit too fatuous.

Emotional Appeal

Although I think this gives the play a certain quality of slick-paper magazine fiction, it certainly doesn't destroy its emotional appeal. And make no mistake about it—"Tea and Sympathy" does capture attention and that second quality in the title from the outset and holds them consistently to the end. Even if you share my quibbles, you are likely to find yourself pulling for the boy and the wife and scorning their persecutors without reserve. For Mr. Anderson can write for the theater with a sensitive feeling for human bewilderment and heartbreak.

Miss Kerr, in addition to looking very beautiful, plays the wife with delicacy and understanding, despite perhaps a slightly self-conscious nobility at moments. The unrelated Mr. Kerr gives an honest, moving and immensely skillful performance as the boy, proving once again what an exceptional young actor he is. Leif Erickson, as the athletic and disagreeable husband, manages a too studiously unpleasant role with credibility, while John McGovern, as the foolish and insensitive father, and Dick York, as the boy's troubled roommate, are excellent. "Tea and Sympathy" has audience appeal of a high order.

"TEA AND SYMPATHY"

Play by Robert Anderson; staged by Elia Kazan; scenery and lighting by Jo Mielziner; clothes by Anna Hill Johnstone; presented by the Playwrights Company in association with Mary K. Frank at the Ethel Barrymore Theatre, September 30, 1953. The cast:

Laura Reynolds...Deborah Kerr
Lilly Sears....Florida Friebus
Tom Lee.....John Kerr
David Harris..Richard Midgley
Ralph.....Alan Sues
Al.....Dick York
Steve.....Arthur Steuer
Bill Reynolds.....Leif Erickson
Phil.....Richard Franchot
Herbert Lee....John McGovern
Paul.....Yale Wexler

Journal American

October 1, 1953

Excellent Play, Brilliantly Done

By JOHN McCLAIN

IN "Tea and Sympathy," the new Robert Anderson drama which was presented by the Playwrights' Co., at the Barrymore Theatre last night, certain facts seem to have been established: They have the first big hit of the new season, the most decorative and gifted leading lady in several semesters, a juvenile hero of infinite talents and a brilliant new dramatist.

They have, also, the sure hand of Elia Kazan, who stirred the whole thing together to produce an intelligent and engrossing evening in the theatre.

Deborah Kerr, making her first appearance on the Broadway stage, rose beyond her ravishing red-haired beauty to establish herself as an actress of depth and restraint, and John Kerr (no relation), who made so much of a smaller part not long ago in "Bernardine," emerges in full stature as star material. It was a delight to witness, at long last, a truly professional production.

Defends Student

Mr. Anderson's play concerns a teacher, his wife, and several students in a New England boarding school. One of the lads, Mr. Kerr, who is a nonconformist, has been suspected of homosexuality and everybody in the school, with the exception of the master's wife, Miss Kerr, is quick to accept his guilt.

But she has come to know him well through frequent sessions over tea (and sympathy), and she understands him as a normal and sensitive lad. This impels her to defend him fiercely against the cruelty of his classmates, even against the unreasonable prejudice of her husband, a vociferously orthodox ex-athlete.

In the end this leads to the dissolution of her marriage, following her realization that the cause of her husband's militant crusade against the boy is merely an effort to excuse his own incipient abnormality.

Along the line there are a number of memorable scenes: the boy's room-mate trying to teach him how to walk like a man to squelch the rumors; Miss Kerr's valiant though futile efforts to keep the lad from going out to prove his manhood with the town tart; the crisis in which she must take full sides with the boy against her husband, and the final anguished moments with the hopelessly dejected youth.

Expert Cast

In all this both Kerrs can be thankful for Mr. Kazan's fluid and sympathetic direction, and for the expert services of Leif Erickson, as the master, Dick York, as the room-mate, and John McGovern, as the bewildered father who wanted his son to be "one of the clan."

And for a most authentic set by Jo Mielziner which permits action to proceed simultaneously in the student's quarters and the master's suite downstairs.

The author has an unusual gift for legitimate school-boy dialogue, moving and humorous at the same time, and he can construct and write a scene of strenuous emotion. But in my opinion he suffers from a common failing, he over-writes.

Somebody ought to give him a set of scissors. But make them golden scissors—he's that good.

NEW YORK Herald Tribune
October 1, 1953

THEATER

'Tea and Sympathy'

By WALTER F. KERR

AS THE curtain falls on "Tea and Sympathy," the new play at the Barrymore, the wife of a boys' school headmaster is offering herself to a perplexed, slowly awakening seventeen-year-old. The boy has been falsely accused of homosexuality. He has been tormented not only by his fellows but by the men who teach him as well. In a raging effort to prove himself a man he has sought out his first prostitute, and met with the traditional failure. To save him from complete psychological defeat, and from the hint of suicide, this understanding woman enters his room, takes his hand, and murmurs:

"When you speak of this in later years—and you will—be kind."

• • •

Robert Anderson's first produced play is very like its curtain line. It is a sentimental play, almost a dream play in the goddess-like generosity of its warm, titian-haired, idealized heroine. It is a clinical play, steady and rather solemn in its pursuit of the fairly specialized emotions which nag at a number of its characters. Because Elia Kazan has directed it superbly, and because a brilliant company is playing it with a perfect fusion of intensity and restraint, it is also a compelling play, an exceptionally interesting exercise in the theater.

It would be folly, I think, to underestimate the contributions of Mr. Kazan and of Deborah Kerr, John Kerr, Leif Erickson and a half dozen other all but inspired performers.

• • •

Miss Kerr, in particular, brings not only loveliness but a tremendous power of suggestion to what seems to me to be the play's least interestingly-written role. She is asked to exhibit little more than nobility as she unerringly sides with the downtrodden throughout the play's action. Yet she finds interior complexity, a whole series of delicate and hidden facets, for it. A fading smile crosses her face as she hears an unwelcome insinuation; a sidelong glance at her too belligerently masculine husband tells more than the dialogue ever need underscore; a stubborn, unwavering shake of her head as she says "no" when she is expected to say "yes" creates a woman of magical dimensions.

John Kerr, the young actor who made such an impression in last season's "Bernardine," is the uncertain boy who, as he wryly remarks, was born as a gesture to hold his unloving parents together. He failed then, he tells us; and he is failing now. Mr. Kerr makes this hesitant, self-doubting, yet instinctively passionate figure touchingly credible. The part calls for many and surly silences; there is a certain monotony about its prolonged frustration; yet when the actor is shyly explaining to the master's wife that "Candida" is his favorite play, when he is cursing himself out for not even playing tennis properly, or when he is groping feebly toward an indignant father for a trace of affection, the play is surely and strikingly illuminated.

There are other remarkably controlled and evocative images: Leif Erickson's headmaster arching his eyebrows as he takes supercilious relish in a new scandal; Dick York's troubled athlete helping his suspect roommate to acquire a more masculine walk; John McGovern's embarrassed father, Richard Midgley's softly anxious teacher, Florida Friebus' giddy matron. Each of these is firmly but subtly established under Elia Kazan's impeccable direction.

• • •

And, production-wise, Jo Mielziner has captured the precisely right air of shabby gentility, of warm but stuffy literacy, for his New England boys' school dormitory.

What Mr. Anderson has done is to erect a craftsmanlike play upon a difficult, emotionally limited, theme. There is a certain dramatic inhibition about the materials, and "Tea and Sympathy" is inevitably the sort of play in which more is thought than ever is spoken. The language, as a result, is low in key; the psychology is sometimes too patly calculated. But director and actors have enriched it everywhere.

DAILY NEWS
October 1, 1953

'Tea and Sympathy' a Beautiful Play; Deborah Kerr Magnificent

By JOHN CHAPMAN

"Tea and Sympathy" has been beautifully written by Robert Anderson and last evening it was most beautifully acted at the Ethel Barrymore Theatre. Play, production and performance would bestow distinction upon any drama season, and the offering is particularly welcome at this moment because it brings good theatre back into our lives again after so many months of nothing new to see that is worth talking about.

With "Tea and Sympathy" the Fall season is off to a splendid start, and the movies' Deborah Kerr may easily be the actress of the year for an exquisitely sensitive and thrillingly warm performance. With her as the other principal in the drama is young John Kerr—no relation—and he almost matches this gifted and beautiful young woman in the fine quality he gives to a difficult role.

Two Kerrs Score.

John Kerr's role is difficult because Anderson's drama is difficult. Its theme is homosexuality—or the suspicion thereof; and such a play, if it is not to be merely tawdry and cheaply sensational, must be made with good taste and great adroitness. "Tea and Sympathy" has been fashioned with skill and decorum; it is, of course, a drama for adults—but it might also make adults of some who venture to see it.

Miss Kerr plays the wife of a housemaster in a boys' school in New England. While her husband rules the boys, it is her position and duty to be sweet and nice and offer the teenagers tea and sympathy on certain afternoons. John Kerr is one of the lads in the dorm.

This boy is intelligent, sentient, talented and popular until something happens which he does not understand. He has gone swimming, in the nude, with one of his instructors, and the two have been observed by others. The instructor, long suspected of homosexuality, is dismissed from the school—and the boy who was with him is immediately and cruelly misjudged.

Suddenly Shunned.

He does not know what it is all about—but the only person who truly realizes this is the "tea and sympathy" housemaster's wife. His companions taunt him, then shun him; his extraordinary grace and skill on the tennis court, once admired so much, now make him seem effeminate; his liking for longhair music suddenly seems odd, and his assignment to play the leading role in "A School for Scandal"—Lady Teazle—becomes a bitter irony.

Even this boy's roommate, the school's top athlete, begins to doubt him, and urges him to have an immediate affair with the campus Hatrack, a waitress, in order to establish his manhood. The boy's father, too, is suffused with misgivings. Only the wife of the housemaster knows that the young man, who will be 18 tomorrow, is not abnormal but only decenly innocent. When the boy even comes to doubt himself, after a tasteless and disastrous experience with the waitress, it is the wife of the housemaster who brings him to manhood.

Well Directed.

This conclusion of the drama is fairly obvious from the start—but it also is implicit in the play, and the play is a fine one. Elia Kazan has directed an admirable company with great dramatic impact. Among the several admirable performances is one by Dick York, a newcomer to the stage, as the school athlete, and another by Leif Erickson as the excessively masculine, pipe-smoking, mountain-climbing housemaster. Also to be highly commended is John McGovern as the boy's father.

"Tea and Sympathy" has been produced by the Playwrights' Company and Mary K. Frank. Robert Anderson is the newest and youngest member of the Playwrights', and this is his first Broadway offering. He has written like a veteran and like a poet, and Jo Mielziner has given him a fine stage setting.

Daily Mirror

October 1, 1953

'Tea and Sympathy' Opens At the Barrymore

By ROBERT COLEMAN

Take a couple of jiggers of "Young Woodley," add one of "Candida," season with a dash of sexual aberration, and you will have a pretty good idea of what "Tea and Sympathy" is about. It is the first play by Robert Anderson to reach Broadway, and it proves him to be a dramatist of promise.

Because Tom Lee wouldn't wear a crew cut, played tennis with skill rather than overwhelming drive, liked classical music and wanted to be a folk singer, he was considered an "off horse" by his fellow students and masters in a boys school in New England. He just couldn't pretend to be a regular fellow.

SO WHEN he went swimming with a suspect instructor, some of the suspicion rubbed off on him. To make matters worse, his he-mannish housemaster helped spread the unjust rumors, though his sympathetic wife attempted to obtain decent treatment for the boy.

But that isn't all. It turned out that the headmaster had been going in for rugged athletics to hide his own doubts about himself. And when Tom, driven into the arms of a floozy, got mired deeper, the outraged housemistress left her dubious husband after proving to the shaken Tom that he was really quite normal. That all he needed was affection.

There are tense and tender moments in "Tea and Sympathy," but there are also many contrived ones. It was difficult for us to believe that Tom would have been so severely penalized on such flimsy evidence. And it seemed superfluous to indict his major tormentor with unnatural tendencies almost at final curtain's fall.

Though Anderson has taken familiar materials, he has fashioned them into a reasonably arresting and, at times, amusing play. He writes excellent dialogue in flashes. But somehow his work never stirred our emotions as we felt it should. The logic of conviction was absent.

* * *

ELIA KAZAN'S DIRECTION is certainly less than brilliant. Deborah Kerr, who appears to be an admirable actress, had several genuinely touching scenes. But it took her a long time to develop the warmth that we expected from the perceptive housemistress.

John Kerr makes the most of his opportunities as the sensitive, shattered Tom. Within the scope of the part and its direction, he gave by all odds the most effective performance of the evening. Yet we kept thinking of him as the wonderful "big wheel" in Mary Chase's "Bernadine" a while back.

Leif Erickson is good as the brutal headmaster. Dick York is first-rate as Tom's extrovert room-mate. John McGovern, one of our favorite actors, does all he can with the baffling role of a baffled father.

THE PLAYWRIGHTS' Company, in association with Mary K. Frank, is presenting "Tea and Sympathy" at the Ethel Barrymore Theatre. The producers have provided one of Jo Mielziner's fine settings for the new arrival. It is an accurate setting, too, in that Tom's room is drab and bleak, something that some of our fancier boys' schools seem to take pride in. They believe that such formidable quarters mould men.

We anticipated more from "Tea and Sympathy" than we got. Frankly, it proved a disapointment.

New York World-Telegram and The ~~Evening~~ Sun

October 1, 1953

Pilloried Innocence Sets Dramatic Plot

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

Last night's new entry, "Tea and Sympathy," can most simply and briefly be described as a triumph.

It is a drama on a difficult and special subject, which is quite hair raising in broad implications.

The play at the Barrymore depicts in devastating fashion how well-meaning people can crucify one of their own kind when his failure to conform, to act and think and talk and walk like they do, upsets all their calculations about themselves.

The too-familiar problem is floodlighted without mercy by its portrayal in terms of unnatural relations in a boys' boarding school.

In brief, a student is condemned for his innocent association with a professor whose behavior has won reproach and now merits dismissal. Because the boy likes long-hair music, since he disdains a crew haircut and is willing to play female roles in school plays, his life is soon made a pure hell.

Doubts Creep In.

Because of his innocence, he begins to doubt himself. When he tries to assert his "manhood," failure drives him nearly to suicide. Meanwhile the wife of a mountain-climbing professor does her best to save the student from his fellows, her husband and the boy's father. In the end she offers to do the one thing that can restore this boy to some hope for the future, because of his genuine affection for her.

The last few minutes of the play, delicate and difficult to act, held the audience in the longest breathless silence I ever recall in a theater. It is played between the student and the wife.

Yet this relationship is direct. It is the story of the woman's marriage, and the association of the boy with his father, that are the deeply revealing threads of narrative.

Impersonal Marriage.

The woman feels her marriage grow impersonal, as her husband plans less and less time for them alone. She is puzzled, then torn by his vindictive condemnation of the boy she would like to save.

In the end she honestly wrecks her marriage by pointing out to her husband that it is just the same sensitivity in himself which he fears, that causes him to vilify the student.

The boy's father is a little man whose story is revealed in frightening accuracy and fine understatement. He has been divorced and has let his son be raised in schools and camps. He is a rooter for the old campus tie, and is desperately anxious for his boy to be a "regular fellow."

The wicked tragedy of his ego is that he never tries to understand the boy until he is humiliated as his son never can be.

Cautious Scenes.

The play is beautifully set, and directed with fine control. Many scenes are played with breathless caution and tense delays that leave you gasping.

Starred in the production is Deborah Kerr, as the professor's wife, in an exquisitely tender portrayal. The triumph of Miss Kerr's work here is that in playing a woman who believes implicitly in her own rightness, she is never pompous, never even unshakably sure. She is gentle and human, and strong with the resilience that only tender people ever have.

As the boy, John Kerr adds a new pinnacle to his brief but impressive career. He has flashes of rueful humor as the confused, hurt 18-year-old. More important is the simplicity of his playing, which raises the utmost conviction in everything he says or does.

Leif Erickson is just right as the husband, burly and hearty, with surface assurance which turns its back on anything really disturbing. He never caricatures the role, but plays its fullest values.

One of the Boys.

John McGovern is similarly convincing as the father. A slight man with a light voice, he constantly suggests a lifelong struggle to be accepted as one of the boys.

Dick York supplies some of the play's lightest moments, playing in perfect taste the comedy of an innocent athlete who wants to support his roommate in time of trouble. And Florida Friebus has a few delightfully telling moments as a professional flirt among faculty wives, who indirectly sets the atmosphere of gossip in which the tragedy flourishes.

The New York Times

October 1, 1953

Deborah Kerr Stars in 'Tea and Sympathy' at the Ethel Barrymore Playhouse

By BROOKS ATKINSON

Since Robert Anderson is a sensitive writer, it is fortunate that some sensitive actors are playing his drama. He calls it "Tea and Sympathy." Deborah Kerr and John Kerr (not related despite the same name) helped to give it an infinitely sensitive performance at the Ethel Barrymore last evening. Under the direction of Elia Kazan, it restores our theatre to an art again with a fine play put on the stage with great skill and beauty.

To say that "Tea and Sympathy" is the story of a schoolboy falsely suspected of homosexuality is to place the emphasis on the motivation rather than the play. Tom Lee, a gentle, quiet boy in a New England private school, is suspected of homosexuality by the dean, the housemaster, his fellow students and even his father. But Mr. Anderson has something more than scandal in mind. For "Tea and Sympathy" is a play that catches a group of characters in a complicated web of hostilities and sympathies and looks deep into the hearts of its principal people.

* * *

Everyone in the school is heartily regular. They operate as a clan. The housemaster is a pious bully and the schoolboys are half-educated louts. They describe the boy Mr. Anderson is writing about as an "off horse." All they need is a whiff of suspicion to twist him into a complete pariah. He would be destitute of friends if it were not for the housemaster's wife, who is an "off horse" in her own right. She understands him. She defends him. Eventually she restores him to his own respect again. But not until she has turned against her husband and recognized the brutishness of the school.

As a story, "Tea and Sympathy" is not ideal. It is garrulous and rather aimless in an overlong second act. And there are some hackneyed situations in it. But as a portrait of people it is an extraordinarily illuminating piece of work full of moods and subtleties of insight. Mr. Anderson keeps changing his colors as the play moves along and new facets of character are constantly rising to the surface of a rueful story.

* * *

As theatre craftsmanship, the production and the performance are superb. Jo Mielziner's setting of the interior of the school living quarters is one of his many masterpieces—lovely and dramatic at the same time. As the wife of the housemaster, Deborah Kerr has the initial advantage of being extremely beautiful. But she adds to her beauty the luminous perceptions of an artist who is aware of everything that is happening all around her and expresses it in an effortless style.

* * *

John Kerr's portrait of the schoolboy—shy, manly, colloquial, honest—is a remarkably tender, moving piece of acting by a young man who is also an artist. Miss Kerr and Mr. Kerr create performances out of lights and shadows, out of nuances and out of unspoken ideas.

Leif Erickson's portrait of the sanctimonious, athletic housemaster is excellent, also. And the other actors are first rate—John McGovern, as the father; Dick York, as an athlete; Florida Friebus, as a gossipy faculty wife, give notably good performances.

Mr. Anderson has written a troubled idyll with a light touch and a wealth of understanding, and the actors have matched the writing in the delicacy of their playing.

"The Strong Are Lonely"

New York World-Telegram and The ~~Evening~~ Sun

September 30, 1953

'Strong Are Lonely' Centers on Faith

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

"The Strong Are Lonely" is a melodrama about faith, and proposes a gripping, if familiar, question. It concerns the proportional emphasis one must place on means and ends, expressed through the strict tenets of obedience of the Jesuit order.

The new play at the Broadhurst has much to recommend it, in the overt way it peruses an intellectual problem. Yet in this production it fails in the final analysis because it never really touches the onlooker.

The remoteness of the subject and the mixed styles of acting combine to make the play as unreal, hence as inhuman, as an algebraic equation.

"The Strong Are Lonely" concerns a Jesuit colony in South America in the latter part of the 18th Century. These men have converted innumerable Indians, and are training them for self-government. To do this they have isolated them, "stolen" them, from the Spanish colonists who had enslaved them at great profit.

Now comes a command to disband the colony. An investigation forces the King's emissary to admit that the charges of profiteering, treachery and enslavement are all false. But the decision is already made.

The Father Provincial would combat the Crown, and even arrests the royal officer. But a Legate comes from his own Order, in disguise, and conveys the command of the Father General in Spain. The Indians are to be turned back to their murderous masters, and the Jesuits must leave the country.

The situation ends in bloodshed, and the play in an honest facing of the fact that there is no clear answer to the conflict. The high powers of the Order realize that the success of this colony invites such greedy hatred of the Jesuits at large that it threatens the whole Order. So the good work of the specific colony must be obliterated.

The melodramatic momentum of the play suggests a real emotional crescendo, as the Father Provincial is forced to fight his convictions and heed his vows. Yet the problem remains no more immediate or quick than if it stood in a series of stained glass windows.

Victor Francen plays the Father boldly and beautifully. His performance glows with concern and concentration that are rarely equaled in the rest of the company.

Dennis King has a thankless task as the King's emissary. This character never agrees with his acts. Mr. King endows him with a trace of cynical wit, but the character remains complex and unclear.

Nils Asther is theatrically most effective as a stubborn, outspoken Dutch merchant seaman. Philip Bourneuf gives suspense and real tensions to the passage where the Legate delivers his orders, and Wesley Addy adds taut excitement to the play as the rebelling Jesuit.

"THE STRONG ARE LONELY"

Play from the German of Fritz Hochwalder, adapted by Eva Le Gallienne from the French version by Jean Mercure and Richard Thieberger; staged by Margaret Webster; scenery and costumes by Rolf Gerard; presented by Walter P. Chrysler Jr. at the Broadhurst Theatre, September 29, 1953. The cast:

Alfonso Fernandez, S. J. ..... Victor Francen
Ladislaus Oros, S. J. ..... Wesley Addy
Rochus Lieberman, S. J. ..... Earl Montgomery
Candia ..... Edward Groag
Naguacu ..... Junaluska
Jose Bustillos ..... John Marley
Andre Cornelis ..... Nils Asther
William Clark, S. J. ..... Paul Ballantyne
Don Pedro de Miura ..... Dennis King
Sergeant of the Guard ..... Stuart Vaughan
Captain Villano ..... Martin Rudy
Captain Arago ..... Frederick Rolf
Lorenzo Querini ..... Philip Bourneuf
Bishop of Buenos Aires ..... Kermit Murdock
Garcia Queseda ..... Dion Allen
Alvaro Catalde ..... John Straub
Father Reinegg, S. J. ..... Joseph Dooley
Father Torres, S.J. ..... Ray Rizzo
Acatu ..... Kuruks Pahitu
Barrigua ..... Dehl Berti

Daily Mirror
September 30, 1953

'The Strong Are Lonely' A Stimulating Play

By ROBERT COLEMAN

Walter P. Chrysler, Jr., made his debut as a manager with a fine production of "The Strong Are Lonely" at the Broadhurst Theatre last evening. The new arrival is an intelligent and often moving drama, which has previously been performed in many European countries. Fritz Hochwalder is the author.

The French version, known as "On Earth as It Is in Heaven," ran for two seasons. It was from this that Eva Le Gallienne made the American adaptation. Victor Francen, who was most successful in Paris, recreates over here the role of Father Provincial of the Society of Jesus in Paraguay.

IT WAS THIS KINDLY and humane man who established a Utopia in Paraguay. He founded a state for the Indians that provided them with comfort, security and a relatively easy life. Since no profit motive was involved, just enough work had to be done to ensure a happy subsistence.

Soon complaints were going back to Spain from colonials on the state's borders. They wanted to exploit the potential wealth of the country, to say nothing of its inhabitants. They were jealous of the Jesuits. Finally, the King sent an emissary to take over the rule of this rapidly expanding Eden.

The Father Provincial and his assistants, who had a well organized army of 30,000 at their command, determined to resist. Until they were convinced that to do so would jeopardize the Jesuit Order throughout the world. In fact, would probably mean its destruction. So they bowed to the will of superior authority.

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FRANCEN PLAYS the Father Provincial with dignity and evocative feeling, though there were times when we lost a line here and there due to his Belgian accent. Dennis King brings graceful style to the role of the Royal envoy. He is wry, understanding, sympathetic and indomitable.

Nils Asther, making his bow on the American stage, is excellent as a bluff, plain-spoken Dutch trader. Philip Bourneuf has a touching and tensely dramatic scene with Francen. Kermit Murdock is most effective as a suave bishop, and Wesley Addy as a militant Father. Mention also is due Earl Montgomery, Paul Ballantyne, Martin Rudy, Frederick Rolf, John Marley, Dion Allen and John Straub in other roles.

Margaret Webster has directed with distinction, and Rolf Gerard has designed a setting that should win a prize or two when awards are being made at the end of the season. It is disarmingly simple, but admirable in line and tone.

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"THE STRONG ARE LONELY" proved absorbing for us. If it sometimes slights drama to become an intellectual exercise, it still is a stimulating play for those seeking something superior to escapist entertainment. If it is overly wordy, its wordage is thoughtful and often eloquent. We found it, on the whole, a stirring adventure in the theatre.

That it will prove profitable, we doubt. It is aimed at a limited audience, an audience not averse to a discussion of philosophic concepts, to an unfolding of historical fact. It adds stature to a season that needs it. We think Chrysler should be proud of producing it even though it may not make a dime.

NEW YORK **Herald Tribune**
September 30, 1953

THEATER

'The Strong Are Lonely'

By WALTER F. KERR

THE actors in the new play at the Broadhurst are engaged in the exploration of a subtle and fascinating intellectual problem, but you'd never guess it from the roaring, prancing, and rococo posturing that has somehow captured the stage.

Though "The Strong Are Lonely" has to do with some fine distinctions between Church and State, between personal conscience and political command, the performers are playing it as though Sir Henry Irving had just opened in "The Bells" and was setting the pace for the town.

No character ever gives another a direct, civil answer. He pauses, rises, squares his shoulders, flips back his cape, moistens his lips, sets his jaw, and declaims. Sonorities bounce off the walls of Rolf Gerard's handsome white setting with a fierce and bombastic echo. Fingers fly to foreheads in perplexed thought. Arms are thrown open in lush abandon. Black-robed priests bound across the stage and then freeze in shuddering silence. Heads drop regularly onto monastery tables, and when tables aren't available, these bravura figures crumple into picturesque little piles on the floor.

Something of all this extravagance must, I think, be laid to Eva Le Gallienne's translation of what was originally an Austrian work. From the Viennese playwright Fritz Hochwalder, Miss Le Gallienne has inherited a challenging and, for our times, exciting theme.

The play has to do with a Jesuit establishment among the Indians of Paraguay in 1767. The earnest fathers have established an almost perfect communal society. The profits of their labors are divided evenly among the Christianized natives. There is no such thing as money. Neither is there capital punishment. The husbandmen sing at their work. They are also armed, and well drilled, to resist any sort of aggression, so well armed indeed that a visiting Spanish commander is moved to remark that "the Kingdom of God has become quite a power on earth."

But this well organized world has given rise to rancor, spite, and economic envy among neighboring communities. The Spanish government suspects that it is an autonomous state which must be destroyed. The Jesuit order itself becomes terrified of this local success; it is turning legitimate governments everywhere against the Society of Jesus. Under orders from his own religious superior, the head of the movement must see to its dissolution. It has brought God into politics and, as one of the fathers explains, "God is no politician."

At times the pertinence of this primitive struggle almost succeeds in overcoming the hollowness of its present production. Bernard Shaw, writing in his "Saint Joan" vein, would have made a magnificent debate of the whole thing. It is unfair, of course, to hold Miss Le Gallienne, or any one else, to the precise measure of Shaw. But it is surely fair to ask that so tantalizing a question be thrashed out with some sort of intellectual subtlety, complexity, and asperity.

Miss Le Gallienne has settled for a stately, solemn, and often empty rhetoric. "There is only one law here," shouts one booming voice, "and that is the law of the king!" "There is only one law here," promptly bellows another, "and that is the law of God!" It is not the contest which is developed, only the actors' diaphragms.

And director Margaret Webster has played directly into the pontifical style. Miss Webster's important contributions to the American stage, particularly in the mounting of Shakespeare, need not be enumerated here. But she has brought her cloak-and-sword manner along with her, splashing it over decidedly different materials; the language of the play is never vivid enough, or poetic enough, or stinging enough to support the long-legged lope.

All of the players are caught up in the whirlpool. But Victor Francen, who has played the priest-leader some four hundred times in France, still leaves us with some poignant images: His sad, reasonable, courageous face as he tiredly ticks off his points; the sag of his jaw as he receives the worst news possible; the agony of his abject surrender.

Dennis King underplays a couple of scenes for cool and acid effect, Nils Asther is amusing as he explains why Jesuit tea tastes better than all other teas and Philip Bourneuf does what he can with an ineffectual Jesuit "inquisition." But the successes are small and intermittent in this overripe treatment of a promising subject.

New York Post

September 30, 1953

By Richard Watts Jr.

Tragedy of a Great Experiment

The philosophical implication of the attempt by the Jesuits to establish a Kingdom of God on earth among the Indians of seventeenth and eighteenth century Paraguay is clearly not ordinary material for the drama these days. Because it takes so unusual and thoughtful a subject and contemplates it with considerable sensitivity and emotional forcefulness, it seems to me that "The Strong Are Lonely," which opened last night at the Broadhurst Theater, is a striking and interesting play, despite a number of weaknesses in its manner of treatment.

This is the drama adapted by Eva Le Gallienne from the work of an Austrian playwright named Fritz Hochwalder, which had a great critical and popular success in Paris a few seasons ago. Let it be said for it at once that it makes no effort to achieve any easy popular appeal, despite the presence of a number of highly emotional scenes. It has an all-male cast, it has a very glum story to tell, it deals with theological and philosophical topics on a lofty ethical plane, and, although its central character has high spiritual nobility, it ends on a bitterly defeatist note about the destruction of a great dream.

The Doomed State

Perhaps that central character, the idealistic Father Provincial of the Jesuits in Paraguay, has his spiritual victory in death in an edifying fashion. But the Jesuit state that attempted to bring happiness, freedom, peace and justice to the Indians is overthrown, and the Indians, who had counted on their spiritual advisers to save them, are betrayed into slavery to the rapacious Spanish settlers, while cruelty and intolerance triumph. "This world was not made for the Kingdom of God!" cries one of the characters, and the Jesuit leader, bowing to the orders of his superiors, has to accept that verdict.

That "The Strong Are Lonely" is the sort of play which is described as "talky" is not to be denied. But, recalling the fact that the theater has known such men as Shakespeare and Shaw, this has never seemed to me a serious charge, if the talk happens to be entertaining enough. And, while the Hochwalder drama falters dramatically in its final scene, the conversations in it are, in the main, almost steadily absorbing. And the tragedy of the Father Provincial, who must surrender his dream and betray his devoted Indians to their enemies, without telling that his superiors are responsible, is a moving one.

Abstract Discussion

The play comes to dramatic life most effectively in the scene where the representative of those superiors in Rome reveals himself to the Father Provincial, but even when it is confined to more abstract discussion, it is usually interesting. I don't think Miss Le Gallienne's adaptation is brilliant. I wish, for example, she wouldn't have an eighteenth-century Spanish soldier say, "Mission accomplished!" There are no doubt times when the attention does waver. But "The Strong Are Lonely" has something to say about the important and tragic matter of ideals opposed to reality that is gloomily fascinating.

The idealistic Jesuit is perhaps rather stagily played by Victor Francen, but the French actor does capture the spiritual agony of the man movingly. Philip Bourneuf is admirable as the agent of Rome, and Dennis King, as a sort of Spanish combination of his General Burgoyne and his captain in "Billy Budd," is also effective. There is interesting work by Wesley Addy, as a Jesuit who resists the surrender to authority, and by Nils Asther, as a Dutch Calvinist sympathetic to the tragic experiment. I wish the final scene had more skill, but my absorption in "The Strong Are Lonely" was almost continuous.

DAILY NEWS

September 30, 1953

'The Strong Are Lonely' a Colorful But Unexciting Religious History

By JOHN CHAPMAN

"The Strong Are Lonely," which was presented last evening at the Broadhurst Theatre, is historically interesting, visually imposing and dramatically static. It is Eva Le Gallienne's adaptation of a play by Austria's Fritz Hochwalder concerning the deeds of the Society of Jesuits in the once-great Spanish empire of South America in the 1760s. Although it is punctuated here and there by some vivid performances—notably that of Dennis King as a Spanish inquisitor—director Margaret Webster has been able to make no more of it than a solemn and right minded philosophical pageant.

By 1767, the Jesuit fathers had been able to create what amounted to a state in what was then known as Paraguay, with Buenos Aires as the capital. Through selflessness, the love of Christ and the love of humanity they had won thousands of Indians to their faith. They had liberated these Indians from slave labor imposed by the Spaniards, had made them self-reliant, productive and fairly prosperous, and had even made them into a strong military force.

Such independence naturally aroused the anger of Spanish planters and merchants, and their protests were formally lodged with the King of Spain. The Jesuits were charged with exploiting the Indians, withholding money from the crown and concealing great gold and silver mines. A high officer was sent from Spain to conduct an inquiry.

Lively at Times.

The inquiry is the one lively part of "The Strong Are Lonely." The opponents are King, as the emissary of the crown, and Victor Francen, as the Father Provincial of the churchly order. Quite clearly the Jesuits are innocent on all counts—but the inquiry is a farce nevertheless, because the Jesuits have been found guilty in Spain prior to the hearing and the crown has ordered them to withdraw from South America.

This the Father Provincial refuses to do. Knowing that withdrawal will mean abandoning the Indians to slavery and poverty and with the strength of his "state" behind him, he takes the Spanish official and his soldiers prisoner. This part of the drama is a material conflict which becomes quite fascinating as King, without moving from his inquisitor's chair, conducts the inquiry with the extraordinary resourcefulness, humor and inner intelligence of a fine actor.

Philosophical Troubles.

But now comes a more important but unhappily less interesting conflict—a spiritual one. An onlooker at the trial, apparently a fashionably dressed Spanish gentleman, is revealed as the legate of the Jesuit order. He commands the Father Provincial to free the Spanish prisoners, surrender himself and his priests and obey the royal edict to abandon Paraguay. It means the undoing of all the good which has been accomplished—but, since complete obedience is a founding principle of the Society of Jesus, the Father Provincial must obey. Moreover, the legate's decision is philosophically sound; the Jesuits have assumed temporal power and put the very existence of the order in jeopardy.

This spiritual conflict is interesting in theory but not in practice on the Broadhurst stage. There is little fire in Miss LeGallienne's adaptation and Miss Webster's staging, and Francen, a good actor, is handicapped by an accent which makes him frequently unintelligible.

There are a couple of good character parts — Nils Asther as a genial big Dutchman and Philip Bourneuf as the mysterious legate, —and the sets and costumes by Rolf Gerard are excellent. There also is some nice atmospheric music by Lehman Engel—but the drama burns out fitfully.